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ABSTRACT

This paper presents different perspectives on homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouping of students on an elementary school level. The teachers and administrators were surveyed to discover their preferences and attitudes toward homogeneous and heterogeneous class design and ability grouping within the classroom. Many journal articles advocated heterogeneous grouping. Teachers, however, advocated homogeneous grouping. Additionally, three ability groups (high, middle, and low) were examined to see whether each individual group benefited from heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping. Results found that the lower ability group benefited the most from heterogeneous designs and ability grouping. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SM)

CAN ABILITY GROUPING HELP EDUCATORS MEET HIGHER EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS?

NORA PETRELLO

ABSTRACT

This paper presents different perspectives on homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouping of students on an elementary school level. The teachers and administrators were surveyed to discover their, preferences and attitudes towards homogeneous and heterogeneous class design and ability grouping within the classroom. Many journal articles advocated heterogeneous grouping; teachers, however, advocated homogeneous grouping. Additionally, three ability groups (high, middle and low) were examined to see whether each individual group benefited from heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping and found that the lower ability group, benefited the most from heterogeneous designs and ability grouping.

INTRODUCTION

Heterogeneous versus homogenous grouping in the elementary school classroom is a topic that has long been debated by educators. Hollifield found that, "ability grouping of students is one of the oldest and most controversial issues in elementary and secondary schools" (1987, p. 1). Recently the school at which I am employed has moved its ability grouping from homogenous to heterogeneous grouping.

THE HIGH ABILITY GROUP

Many of my colleagues have found it more difficult to teach and feel that heterogeneous class design hinders the academic achievement of our gifted group of students. The theory that high

ability students will be denied opportunities when heterogeneous grouping takes place, due to the fact that they already know the material and will be used to teach the lower group of students (Lou, et. al, 1996). With a recent emphasis of meeting higher standards being placed on our school system, it seems detrimental to hinder the group of students who would have little trouble meeting these standards. But the instructional content must also be adjusted to meet or exceed these higher standards. Harlem, Wynne, Malcom, and Heather found that "some pupils in the high ability groups were given enrichment, whilst others were accelerated to the work of the next grade in algebra. Only those accelerated showed any difference from the mixed ability groups" (1997, p. 11).

On the other hand, it can be said that having high ability students instruct their lower ability peers, helps them gain greater insight and understanding into how they derived their conclusion. In New York State, the new fourth grade math test is based upon how well you can explain your answer. The process of peer tutoring can help these students achieve better grades on this test, thus reinforcing the implementation of meeting the higher standards.

It can also be argued that placing high ability students in a homogeneous class setting will create a social class of upper echelon within the school. Katz supports heterogeneous grouping by stating, "children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but to find companions among their peers who match, compliment, or supplement their interest in different ways" (1995, p. 3). There is more of an opportunity for them to be exposed to more varied selections of companions and competencies in heterogeneous classes.

Some educators feel that the higher ability group is destined to do well. The only thing that can deter their achievements are outside factors, such as their home environment, which the school usually has very little control over. This group will maintain its higher order ranking whether placed in heterogeneous or homogenous classes. In a study conducted by (Lou, et al) it was found that the higher ability students benefited the most from grouping (1996, p. 443). Nelson cites Harp, who examined studies that found that the higher achieving groups received the instructional techniques that perpetuate critical thinking and contrasting them to the lower groups that receive less critical and stimulating instruction (1994, p. 2). When examining

Gentry's thesis, I found that she cites Kulik and Kulik in their studies where gifted students in a homogenous ability grouped class has positive results in their achievement scores (1987, p. 17).

THE MIDDLE ABILITY GROUP

The middle group is perhaps the most overlooked group. I could find the least amount of information on this group. In a study conducted by Lou, et al, the middle group was found to be the least affected from grouping practices (1996, p. 443).

The middle group is the most vulnerable of the three groups. In my seven years of teaching experience, I observed students in this group move either into the upper or lower groups. This can depend upon the way they perceive themselves or the quality of instruction that they receive. This is why I personally place an emphasis on the need to do further research in their behalf. Also if one examines the structure of a population, this is where the largest category that most students fit into. Here lies our most promising group that will enable us in meeting higher standards. As we continue to take them for granted, we will be wasting our greatest hope to obtaining higher standards.

THE LOWER ABILITY GROUP

Last, but not least, we have the lower group. Much has been written on them. It has perceived by many authors that educators automatically lower the standards when instructing this group. Mills found the following:

> Those opposed to tracking (grouping) are concerned about the perceived psychological damage to low achievers, the slow pace and lower quality of instruction, the more inexperienced or sometimes less-capable teachers assigned to teach lower ability students, the low expectations for student performance held by teachers and the absence of strong behavioral peer role models in classes for low ability students (1998, p.1).

Burnett supports Mills' statement by stating that:

> "Critics suggest, however, that ability grouping all too often limits the instructional experience of lower-track students to a little more than rote drill on basic skills. Further, because mobility between tracks is rare, students placed in low tracks at a young age may never e transferred to the upper tracks where higher order skills are taught" (1995, p.1)

In Katz's article on The Benefits of Mixed-Age Grouping, she advocates heterogeneous grouping. She states that "children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also find companions among their peers who match, compliment, or supplement their interests in different ways (1997, p.1). Even though this article focuses on grouping by age, one can draw an analogy to advocate heterogeneous grouping practices.

Lou et, al. states that, "low-ability students learned significantly more in heterogeneous ability groups than in homogeneous ability groups" (1996, p.449). This statement negates the argument for Special Education classes, where low ability students are grouped together.

When homogeneous grouping is employed, does it set social classes within a school? Hallinan states that," a greater proportion of minority and low-income students are assigned to the lower tracks. When academic achievement is controlled, the race ethnicity and income affect on track assignment decreases but does not disappear" (1994 p. 80). To overcome this effect Halliman suggests that students in the lower ability group need to be challenged and be given tangible rewards for improvement (1994, p. 82).

CONDUCTING A SURVEY

I felt it was important to survey the colleagues in my school. I received 25 responses from educators who worked with students in kindergarten to fourth grade. I asked questions that would reflect the beliefs and attitudes of the staff in my school with regards to heterogeneous and homogeneous class design and ability grouping.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS

One hundred percent of the teachers responding to the survey are certified teachers, who have been teaching from one to thirty-three years.

When asked who was given the opportunity to teach the upper achieving groups, fifty-two percent felt that senior teachers were chosen for this assignment. Forty-eight percent felt that equal opportunity was given to both new and senior teachers. I know that on my grade level, where eleven second grades exist, the first three higher achieving classes are given to the experienced teachers who are perceived as productive educators by the administration.

Eight-four percent of the teachers responded as preferring homogeneously designed classes. Some of the reasons included that the group can be served better if the teacher's attention or focus is not

divided. When there is a very large range difference in ability, it makes it harder to meet individual needs. Others felt that when high achievers are placed with at risk or lower achieving students, the at risk students pull the high achievers down. The teacher cannot teach at a fast pace because the low achievers need reteaching.

In homogeneously designed classes, 52% of the teachers advocated grouped instruction over whole class instruction. Some of the reasons given were that lower teacher student ratios are helpful when grouping heterogeneous or homogeneous classes. Many felt that grouping provides more individualized instruction. Each child can explore its interest with the teacher taking on the role of facilitator. When classes were advocated to be homogeneously designed, and when grouping was not advocated, it was felt that whole group instruction provides students with the opportunity to be presented with the same information.

When classes were heterogeneously designed, grouping was considered to be an essential element to teaching. Forty-four percent of the teachers preferred to teach the high achieving group, thirty-six percent preferred the middle achievers, and twelve percent chose the low achievers.

Eighty percent of the teachers felt that the lower group would have difficulty meeting the new standards. When asked, eighty percent of the teachers modified their teaching techniques and questioning strategies when teaching the lower achieving students. Their reasons included that these students usually need more reinforcement on basic skills. Lessons must be brought down to their level, but still addressing strategies for their grade level. One teacher felt that the lessons need to be designed in small doses. Another felt that lower achieving students need more background knowledge. Others felt that these students usually need more reinforcement on basic skills.

Sixty-eight percent of the teachers perceived that the group to benefit the most from grouped instruction were the lower achieving students. It was felt that more individualized instruction, pacing, and grouping provided less stress for the child. It was also felt that they need more attention.

In contrast the book, Raising the Standard by Doyle and Pimentel would advocate the "use of whole-class instruction most of the time"(1997, p. 131). They did not state whether the classes should be designed homogeneously or heterogeneously.

CONCLUSION

Valid reasoning can be presented for both homogeneously and heterogeneously designed classes and groups. It is easy to see why this has been a topic that has long been debated.

The survey I distributed confirmed most of the conclusions that the authors stated. I feel that each educator knows what grouping technique works best for their class and should be provided the professional courtesy to design their classroom to meet the needs of the students in their class. There is never one single answer to any question when addressing the subject of education. To enable educators to meet the higher standards, they must be trusted to design their classrooms to how they perceive the students' needs can best be met.

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